



REPLY TO
ATTENTION OF

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
SEATTLE DISTRICT, CORPS OF ENGINEERS
P.O. BOX 3755
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98124-2255

Planning Branch

FEB 8 2002

Ms. Anne Badgley
Regional Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
911 NE 11th Ave.
Portland, OR 97232-4181

Mr. Robert Lohn
Regional Director
National Marine Fisheries Service
7600 Sand Point Way NE
Seattle, WA 98115

Dear Ms. Badgley and Mr. Lohn:

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), in agreement with the federal agencies involved in the recovery of fish species listed under the Endangered Species Act, are considering implementation of an interim alternative flood control procedure, Variable Discharge (VARQ), affecting Libby, Hungry Horse, and Grand Coulee dams beginning January, 2003.

The Corps and Reclamation have begun preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), on "Upper Columbia Basin Alternative Flood Control and Fish Operations," for possible long-term implementation of the VARQ alternative flood control. VARQ flood control operations maintain system flood control protection while providing higher winter pool elevations at Libby and Hungry Horse Dams and increased spring and summer flows in certain years for fish listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The operational changes are described in the December 2000 Biological Opinions (BiOps) from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) concerning operation of the 14 main Federal Columbia River Power System dams. The purpose of these BiOps is to avoid jeopardy and aid in recovery of sturgeon, bull trout, salmon and steelhead stocks listed under the ESA in the Columbia Basin. The Corps and Reclamation held meetings with tribal staffs in the spring of 2001, and with the public and fish and wildlife agencies in the U.S. and Canada during October 2001 through January 2002.

Completion of the EIS is scheduled for 2004 with possible implementation of a VARQ operation in the 2005 fish migration season. The USFWS and NMFS have indicated that failing to implement VARQ in a timely manner may result in an unanticipated take of listed species. Consequently, the USFWS, NMFS, the Corps, and Reclamation have been discussing whether

implementation of VARQ as an interim operation for 2003 is possible. The Corps and Reclamation, in cooperation with the USFWS and NMFS, have developed the following plan for determining the feasibility of interim operations.

The Corps plans to complete a spill test called for in the USFWS BiOp at Libby Dam in June 2002. As VARQ increases the likelihood of spill, this test is intended to measure the relationship of spill to total dissolved gas (TDG) levels. Spill at Libby may raise TDG levels above the Montana state water quality standard, and may impact bull trout and other fish. The Corps is also performing hydrologic studies in 2002 to evaluate this new flood control procedure. Additionally, the Corps and the Bonneville Power Administration, who together represent the U.S. Entity, will coordinate possible implementation of an interim VARQ operation with Canada under the Columbia River Treaty. Reclamation plans to review recently collected information on contaminant levels in sediments in Lake Roosevelt that may be more exposed by VARQ implementation. The Federal Agencies will continue to seek out and include new biological information as it becomes available.

The information gathered from these activities will help the Corps, Reclamation, and the other federal agencies decide whether to proceed with an interim implementation of VARQ in January, 2003. Appropriate National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation will be prepared prior to implementation of any proposed interim VARQ operation.

Meanwhile, the EIS is on track and will proceed as scheduled to evaluate the effects of the proposed long-term alternative flood control operation. I intend to notify the Congressional delegations, governors, states, tribes, Canada and other regional interests of this plan. We believe you concur in this approach; however, if this is not consistent with your understanding, please immediately contact me at 206-764-3690, or Mr. Jeff Laufle, the EIS project manager, at 206-764-6578 or jeffrey.c.laufle@usace.army.mil.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ralph H. Graves".

Ralph H. Graves
Colonel, Corps of Engineers
District Engineer

cf:

Mr. J. William McDonald
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Mr. Steve Wright
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